

# Kowhai Ngutukaka (Kakabeak)

## *What is it?* A rare endemic shrub

Kowhai ngutukaka or kakabeak is a shrub found only in New Zealand. It is a member of the pea family and its closest relatives are in Australia. In spring it produces stunning large red flowers which hang in clusters of 15-20 blooms. It has bright green seedpods which turn brown and split open when dry. These pods contain large numbers of tightly packed small black seeds. Plants can grow up to 2-3m tall, producing long, trailing stems that form new plants when they come into contact with soil. In this way, one parent plant can cover a large area.

The kowhai ngutukaka's beautiful flowers and edible seedpods have long made this plant attractive to gardeners and were used by Maori for gifting and trading. In addition its seed remains viable for a long time and therefore can be stored and transported easily.

## *Does it grow near where I live?*

We don't know what the pre-human distribution of kowhai ngutukaka was as Maori are thought to have transported it around the country. We do know that kowhai ngutukaka once grew in Northland, Auckland, Great Barrier Island, Coromandel, around Lake Waikaremoana, the East Cape and Hawkes Bay.

Today kowhai ngutukaka grows on Moturemu Island in the Kaipara harbour, at several sites on the East Cape, Te Urewera National Park, near Wairoa, and in Boundary Stream Mainland Island in Hawkes Bay.

## *Where does it like to grow?*

Kowhai ngutukaka grows in open, sunny, steep sites, often on rocky outcrops, slips, the bases of cliffs or edges of lakes and streams. It is a relatively short-lived plant, sometimes lasting 15-20 years. Kowhai ngutukaka has a long-lived seed which may still be able to germinate 30 years after being produced, creating a 'seed bank' that holds many seeds ready to germinate when conditions suit. This enables it to grow in shrubland which is not permanently open but is frequently disturbed. The seeds wait for light gaps to appear, e.g. following a treefall or a slip, and then germinate in response.



Being a member of the pea family kowhai ngutukaka can fix nitrogen, enabling it to grow in infertile sites.

This lovely shrub is commonly found in plant centres and gardeners are often surprised to hear it is one of our most threatened plants. It is a very nutritious plant and has no defences against browsing by deer, goats, pigs, hares, stock or introduced garden snails (which are often found in the wild). Kowhai ngutukaka was noted as being uncommon in the wild as early as the beginning of last century. Introduced plants, such as gorse and buddleia, also threaten its survival as they like to live in similar sites.



## *Why is it rare?*

One of New Zealand's first native plant conservation programmes was created to protect kowhai ngutukaka around Lake Waikaremoana. Plants in the wild were fenced to exclude browsing animals in several areas and new sites planted out. Recently local hapu, with help from DoC, have established Nga Tipu a Tane ki Waikaremoana nursery at Kokako and Tuai Schools, in the Lake Waikaremoana area. Plants are grown here for eventual return to the wild.

## *What are we doing?*

On the East Cape, an extensive roadside planting programme was established with local schools and an ingenious method of protecting plants in the wild using animal repellent sprays developed. Seed from wild plants at Boundary Stream Mainland Island has been collected and the grown plants returned to the reserve. Replanting projects have also been conducted in Northland, Auckland and near Wairoa.

## *How can you help?*

Ask DoC about using local plants if you live near a site where kowhai ngutukaka grows naturally. Please don't use plants from garden centres in these areas as we don't know where the nursery plants have originally come from. Using nursery plants could lead to 'genetic pollution' of the local variety. DoC staff are happy to talk about the best options and ways you can become involved in the recovery of kowhai ngutukaka in the wild.

Keeping the gene pool pure is not an issue if you live in an urban area away from natural populations.

People interested in helping protect this unique plant should contact their closest DoC office. Addresses are listed below. You can help by becoming a volunteer or by making a donation.

Your contribution can make the difference.

Contacts: Aniwaniwa Area Office 06 837 3803, Gisborne Area Office 06 869 0460, Wairoa Field Centre 06 838 8252, Boundary Stream Mainland Island 06 834 3111, Auckland Conservancy 09 307 9279.

